

Hepatitis A

What is hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A (formerly known as infectious hepatitis) is a liver disease caused by the hepatitis A virus (HAV). The disease is fairly common, but has declined significantly in recent years.

Who gets hepatitis A?

Antibodies produced during a previous infection with HAV, or in response to immunization for HAV, protect against infection. Anyone who has not been previously exposed to HAV or the immunization can become infected and ill from the hepatitis A virus.

How is the virus spread?

The hepatitis A virus enters through the mouth, multiplies in the body, and is passed in the feces (stool). The virus can then be carried on an infected person's hands and can be spread by direct contact, or by consuming food or drink that has been handled by the individual. In some cases, it can be spread by sexual contact or by consuming water or food (e.g., raw shellfish, vegetables) contaminated by sewage.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis A?

The symptoms of hepatitis A may include tiredness, poor appetite, fever and nausea. Urine may become darker in color, and then jaundice (a yellowing of the skin and the whites of the eyes) may appear. The disease is rarely fatal and most people recover in a few weeks without any complications. Infants and young children tend to have very mild symptoms and are less likely to develop jaundice than are older children and adults. Not everyone who is infected will have all of the symptoms.

How soon after exposure do symptoms appear?

The symptoms may appear two to six weeks after exposure, but usually within four weeks.

How long is an infected person able to spread the virus?

The contagious period begins about two weeks before the symptoms appear. Most people are probably no longer contagious after the first week of jaundice. There is no carrier state.

Does past infection with hepatitis A make a person immune?

An individual who has recovered from hepatitis A is immune for life and does not continue to carry the virus.

What is the treatment for hepatitis A?

There are no special medicines or antibiotics that can be used to treat a person once the symptoms appear. Generally, bed rest is all that is needed for persons to recover from hepatitis A.

How can hepatitis A be prevented?

The single most effective way to prevent spread is careful hand washing after using the toilet, changing diapers, or before eating or preparing food. Avoid eating raw shellfish taken from potentially contaminated waters. Also, infected people should not handle foods during the contagious period.

Disinfection of 'clean' surfaces with a 1:100 dilution of household bleach in water (i.e., approximately 1/4 cup of 5.25% bleach in one gallon of water) or cleaning solutions containing quaternary ammonium and/or HCl (including concentrations found in many toilet cleaners) are effective in inactivating HAV.

The hepatitis A vaccine is effective at preventing infection with HAV. Close contacts of an infected person should call a doctor or the health department to determine if they should obtain a shot of vaccine or immune globulin (IG) to reduce their chance of becoming ill. Vaccine and/or IG may also be administered to persons traveling overseas to protect against hepatitis A infection.